



# Overview of ISIS

**Brian P. Sheets**

## Background Information on ISIS<sup>1</sup>

### Overview

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is an Arabic Salafi jihadist militant group and unrecognized proto-state that follows a fundamentalist, Wahhabi doctrine of Sunni Islam. ISIS gained global prominence in early 2014 when it drove Iraqi government forces out of key cities in its Western Iraq offensive, followed by its capture of Mosul and the Sinjar massacre.

This group has been designated a terrorist organization by the United Nations and many individual countries. ISIS is widely known for its videos of beheadings of both soldiers and civilians, including journalists and aid workers, and its destruction of cultural heritage sites. The United Nations holds ISIS responsible for human rights abuses and war crimes, and Amnesty International has charged the group with ethnic cleansing on a "historic scale" in northern Iraq.

### Purpose

ISIS is a theocracy, proto-state and a Salafi or Wahhabi group. It follows an extremist interpretation of Islam, promotes religious violence, and regards Muslims who do not agree with its interpretations as infidels or apostates. According to Hayder al Khoei, ISIS's philosophy is represented by the symbolism in the Black Standard variant of the legendary battle flag of Prophet Muhammad that it has adopted: the flag shows the Seal of Muhammad within a white circle, with the phrase above it, "There is no god but God". Such symbolism has been said to point to ISIS' belief that it represents the restoration of the caliphate of early Islam, with all the political, religious and eschatological ramifications that this would imply.

According to some observers, ISIS emerged from the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, the first post-Ottoman Islamist group dating back to the late 1920s in Egypt. It adheres to global jihadist principles and follows the hardline ideology of al-Qaeda and many other modern-day jihadist groups. However, other sources trace the group's roots to Wahhabism.

For their guiding principles, the leaders of the Islamic State are open and clear about their almost exclusive commitment to the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam. The group circulates images of Wahhabi religious textbooks from Saudi Arabia in the schools it controls. Videos from the group's territory have shown Wahhabi texts plastered on the sides of an official missionary van.

According to The Economist, dissidents in the ISIS capital of Raqqa report that "all 12 of the judges who now run its court system ... are Saudis". Saudi practices also followed by the group include the establishment of religious police to root out "vice" and enforce attendance at salat prayers, the widespread use of capital punishment, and the destruction or re-purposing of any non-Sunni religious

buildings. Bernard Haykel has described ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's creed as "a kind of untamed Wahhabism".

ISIS aims to return to the early days of Islam, rejecting all innovations in the religion, which it believes corrupts its original spirit. It condemns later caliphates and the Ottoman Empire for deviating from what it calls pure Islam, and seeks to revive the original Wahhabi project of the restoration of the caliphate governed by strict Salafist doctrine. Following Salafi-Wahhabi tradition, ISIS condemns the followers of secular law as disbelievers, putting the current Saudi Arabian government in that category.

Salafists such as ISIS believe that only a legitimate authority can undertake the leadership of jihad, and that the first priority over other areas of combat, such as fighting non-Muslim countries, is the purification of Islamic society. For example, ISIS regards the Palestinian Sunni group Hamas as apostates who have no legitimate authority to lead jihad and see fighting Hamas as the first step toward confrontation by ISIS with Israel.

## History

ISIS originated as Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in 1999, which pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and participated in the Iraqi insurgency following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by Western forces. The group proclaimed itself a worldwide caliphate and began referring to itself as Islamic State ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah) or ISIS in June 2014. As a caliphate, it claims religious, political, and military authority over all Muslims worldwide. Its adoption of the name Islamic State and its idea of a caliphate have been widely criticized, with the United Nations, various governments, and mainstream Muslim groups rejecting its statehood.

In April 2013, having expanded into Syria, the group adopted the name ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī 'l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām. As al-Shām is a region often compared with the Levant or Greater Syria, the group's name has been variously translated as "Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham", "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, (both abbreviated as ISIS), or "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (abbreviated as ISIL).

While the use of either one or the other acronym has been the subject of debate, the distinction between the two and its relevance has been considered not so great. Of greater relevance is the name Daesh, which is an acronym of ISIS's Arabic name al-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fī al-'Irāq wa-al-Shām, Daesh, or Da'ish. This name has been widely used by ISIS's Arabic-speaking detractors although and, to a certain extent, is considered derogatory, as it resembles the Arabic words Daes (lit. "one who crushes, or tramples down, something underfoot") and Dāhis (loosely translated: "one who sows discord"). Within areas under its control, ISIS considers use of the name Daesh punishable by flogging or cutting out the tongue.

In late June 2014, the group renamed itself ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah (lit. Islamic State or IS), declaring itself a worldwide caliphate. The name "Islamic State" and the group's claim to be a caliphate have been

widely rejected, with the UN, various governments, and mainstream Muslim groups refusing to use the new name.

In Syria, the group conducted ground attacks on both government forces and opposition factions, and by December 2015, it held a large area in western Iraq and eastern Syria containing an estimated 2.8 to 8 million people, where it enforced its interpretation of sharia law. ISIS is now believed to be operational in 18 countries across the world, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, with "aspiring branches" in Mali, Egypt, Somalia, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines. As of 2015, ISIS was estimated to have an annual budget of more than US\$1 billion and a force of more than 30,000 fighters.

The group's declaration of a new caliphate in June 2014 and its adoption of the name "Islamic State" have been criticized and ridiculed by Muslim scholars and rival Islamists both inside and outside the territory it controls. The United Nations Security Council, the United States, Canada, Turkey, Australia, Russia, the United Kingdom, and other countries generally call the group "ISIS", while much of the Arab world uses the Arabic acronym "Dā'ish". France's Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said "This is a terrorist group and not a state. I do not recommend using the term Islamic State because it blurs the lines between Islam, Muslims, and Islamists. The Arabs call it 'Daesh'.

In late August 2014, a leading Islamic educational institution, Dar al-Ifta al-Misriyyah in Egypt, advised Muslims to stop calling the group "Islamic State" and instead refer to it as "Al-Qaeda Separatists in Iraq and Syria" or "QSIS", because of the militant group's "un-Islamic character". When addressing the United Nations Security Council in September 2014, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott summarized the widespread objections to the name "Islamic State" thus: "To use this term 'Islamic State' is to dignify a death cult; a death cult that, in declaring itself a caliphate, has declared war on the world". The group is very sensitive about its name. "They will cut your tongue out even if you call them ISIS – you have to say 'Islamic State'", said a woman in ISIS-controlled Mosul.

In mid-October 2014, representatives of the Islamic Society of Britain, the Association of British Muslims, and the UK's Association of Muslim Lawyers proposed that "'Un-Islamic State' (UIS) could be an accurate and fair alternative name to describe this group and its agenda", further stating, "We need to work together and make sure that these fanatics don't get the propaganda that they feed off." The "Islamic State" is mocked on social media websites such as Twitter and YouTube, with the use of hashtags, mock recruiting ads, fake news articles, and YouTube videos. In news reports the name is usually preceded by the term "so-called".

### Islamic Eschatology

One difference between ISIS and other Islamist and jihadist movements, including al-Qaeda, is the group's emphasis on eschatology and apocalypticism – that is, a belief in a final Day of Judgment by God, and specifically, a belief that the arrival of one known as Imam Mahdi is near. ISIS believes that it will defeat the army of "Rome" at the town of Dabiq, in fulfilment of prophecy. Following its interpretation

of the Hadith of the Twelve Successors, ISIS also believes that after al-Baghdadi there will be only four more legitimate caliphs.

References to the End Times fill Islamic State propaganda. It's a big selling point with foreign fighters, who want to travel to the lands where the final battles of the apocalypse will take place. The civil wars raging in those countries today (Iraq and Syria) lend credibility to the prophecies. The Islamic State has stoked the apocalyptic fire. For Bin Laden's generation, the apocalypse wasn't a great recruiting pitch. Governments in the Middle East two decades ago were more stable, and sectarianism was more subdued. It was better to recruit by calling to arms against corruption and tyranny than against the Antichrist. Today, though, the apocalyptic recruiting pitch makes more sense than before.

### Strategy

Since at least 2004, a significant goal of the group has been the foundation of a Sunni Islamic state. Specifically, ISIS has sought to establish itself as a caliphate, an Islamic state led by a group of religious authorities under a supreme leader – the caliph – who is believed to be the successor to Prophet Muhammad. In June 2014, ISIS published a document in which it claimed to have traced the lineage of its leader al-Baghdadi back to Muhammad, and upon proclaiming a new caliphate in June 2014, the group appointed al-Baghdadi as its caliph. As caliph, he demands the allegiance of all devout Muslims worldwide, according to Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh).

ISIS has detailed its goals in its Dabiq magazine, saying it will continue to seize land and take over the entire Earth until its “Blessed flag...covers all eastern and western extents of the Earth, filling the world with the truth and justice of Islam and putting an end to the falsehood and tyranny of jahiliyyah [state of ignorance], even if American and its coalition despise such.”

According to German journalist Jürgen Todenhöfer, who spent ten days embedded with ISIS in Mosul, the view he kept hearing was that ISIS wants to "conquer the world", and that all who do not believe in the group's interpretation of the Qur'an will be killed. Todenhöfer was struck by the ISIS fighters' belief that "all religions who agree with democracy have to die" and by their incredible enthusiasm for killing "hundreds of millions" of people.

When the caliphate was proclaimed, ISIS stated: "The legality of all emirates, groups, states and organizations becomes null by the expansion of the khilafah's [caliphate's] authority and arrival of its troops to their areas." This was a rejection of the political divisions in Southwestern Asia that were established by the UK and France during World War I in the Sykes–Picot Agreement.

All non-Muslim areas would be targeted for conquest after the Muslim lands were dealt with, according to the Islamist manual “Management of Savagery”.

Documents found after the death of Samir Abd Muhammad al-Khlifawi, a former colonel in the intelligence service of the Iraqi Air Force before the US invasion, who had been described as "the strategic head" of ISIS, detailed planning for the ISIS takeover of northern Syria which made possible "the group's later advances into Iraq".

Al-Khlifawi called for the infiltration of areas to be conquered with spies who would find out "as much as possible about the target towns - who lived there, who was in charge, which families were religious, which Islamic school of religious jurisprudence they belonged to, how many mosques there were, who the imam was, how many wives and children he had and how old they were". Following this surveillance and espionage would come murder and kidnapping – "the elimination of every person who might have been a potential leader or opponent". In Raqqa, after rebel forces drove out the Assad regime and ISIS infiltrated the town, "first dozens and then hundreds of people disappeared".

Security and intelligence expert Martin Reardon has described ISIS's purpose as being to psychologically "break" those under its control, "so as to ensure their absolute allegiance through fear and intimidation," while generating outright hate and vengeance among its enemies.

Jason Burke, a journalist writing on Salafi jihadism, has written that ISIS's goal is to "terrorize, mobilize and polarize". Its efforts to terrorize are intended to intimidate civilian populations and force governments of the target enemy "to make rash decisions that they otherwise would not choose".

It aims to mobilize its supporters by motivating them with, for example, spectacular deadly attacks deep in Western territory (such as the November 2015 Paris attacks), to polarize by driving Muslim populations – particularly in the West – away from their governments, thus increasing the appeal of ISIS's self-proclaimed caliphate among them, and to: "Eliminate neutral parties through either absorption or elimination". Journalist Rukmini Maria Callimachi also emphasizes ISIS's interest in polarization or in eliminating what it calls the "grey zone" between the black (non-Muslims) and white (ISIS). "The gray are moderate Muslims who are living in the West and are happy and feel engaged in the society here."

A work published online in 2004 entitled Management of Savagery (Idarat at Tawahoush), described by several media outlets as influential on ISIS and intended to provide a strategy to create a new Islamic caliphate, recommended a strategy of:

- attack outside its territory in which fighters would,
- "Diversify and widen the vexation strikes against the Crusader-Zionist enemy in every place in the Islamic world, and even outside of it if possible, so as to
- disperse the efforts of the alliance of the enemy and thus drain it to the greatest extent possible."

The group has been accused of attempting to "bolster morale" and distract attention from its loss of territory to enemies by staging terror attacks abroad (such as the 6 June 2017 attacks on Tehran, the May 22, 2017 bombing in Manchester, UK, and the 3 June 2017 attacks in London that ISIS claimed credit for).

## Organization

Raqqa in Syria was under ISIS control since 2013 and in 2014 it became the group's de facto capital city. Recent fighting is returning it to Iraqi forces.

ISIS is headed and run by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (1971 – 2017). Before their deaths, he had two deputy leaders, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani from Iraq and Abu Ali al-Anbari (also known as Abu Ala al-Afri from Syria, both ethnic Turkmen. Advising al-Baghdadi is a cabinet of senior leaders, while its operations in Iraq and Syria are controlled by local governors.

Beneath the leaders are councils on finance, leadership, military matters, legal matters (including decisions on executions) foreign fighters' assistance, security, intelligence and media. In addition, a shura council has the task of ensuring that all decisions made by the governors and councils comply with the group's interpretation of sharia. While al-Baghdadi has told followers to "advise me when I err" in sermons, according to observers "any threat, opposition, or even contradiction is instantly eradicated".

According analysts who study the group, almost all of ISIS' leaders—including the members of its military and security committees and the majority of its emirs and princes—are former Iraqi military and intelligence officers, specifically former members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath government who lost their jobs and pensions in the de-Ba'athification process after that regime was overthrown.

The former Chief Strategist in the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism of the US State Department, David Kilcullen, has said that "There undeniably would be no Isis if we had not invaded Iraq." It has been reported that Iraqis and Syrians have been given greater precedence over other nationalities within ISIS because the group needs the loyalties of the local Sunni populations in both Syria and Iraq in order to be sustainable. Other reports, however, have indicated that Syrians are at a disadvantage to foreign members, with some native Syrian fighters resenting "favoritism" allegedly shown towards foreigners over pay and accommodation.

In August 2016, media reports based on briefings by Western intelligence agencies suggested that ISIS had a multilevel secret service known in Arabic as Emni, established in 2014, that has become a combination of an internal police force and an external operations directorate complete with regional branches. The unit was believed to be under the overall command of ISIS' most senior Syrian operative, spokesman and propaganda chief Abu Mohammad al-Adnani until his death by airstrike in late August 2016.

## Civilians in ISIS-controlled areas

In 2014 The Wall Street Journal estimated that eight million people lived in the Islamic State. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has stated that ISIS "seeks to subjugate civilians under its control and dominate every aspect of their lives through terror, indoctrination, and the provision of services to those who obey". Civilians, as well as the Islamic State itself, have released footage of some of the human rights abuses.

Social control of civilians is by imposition of ISIS' reading of sharia law, enforced by morality police forces known as Al-Hisbah and the all-women Al-Khanssaa Brigade, a general police force, courts, and other entities managing recruitment, tribal relations, and education.

Estimates of the size of ISIS' military vary widely, from tens of thousands up to 200,000. In early 2015, journalist Mary Anne Weaver estimated that half of ISIS fighters are foreigners. A UN report estimated a total of 15,000 fighters from over 80 countries were in ISIS' ranks in November 2014. US intelligence estimated an increase to around 20,000 foreign fighters in February 2015, including 3,400 from the Western world. In September 2015, the CIA estimated that 30,000 foreign fighters had joined ISIS.

According to Abu Hajjar, a former senior leader of ISIS, foreign fighters receive food, petrol and housing, but unlike native Iraqi or Syrian fighters, they do not receive payment in wages.

## Weapons

ISIS relies mostly on captured weapons with major sources including Saddam Hussein's Iraqi stockpiles from the 2003–2011 Iraq insurgency, weapons from government and opposition forces fighting in the Syrian Civil War, and during the post-US withdrawal Iraqi insurgency. The captured weapons, including armor, guns, surface-to-air missiles, and even some aircraft, enabled rapid territorial growth and facilitated the capture of additional equipment. For example, ISIS captured US-made TOW anti-tank missiles supplied by the United States and Saudi Arabia to the Free Syrian Army in Syria.

The group uses truck and car bombs, suicide bombers and IEDs, and has used chemical weapons in Iraq and Syria. ISIS captured nuclear materials from Mosul University in July 2014, but is unlikely to be able to convert them into weapons. In September 2015, a US official stated that ISIS was manufacturing and using mustard agent in Syria and Iraq, and had an active chemical weapons research team.

ISIS has also used water as a weapon of war. The group closed the gates of the smaller Nuaimiyah dam in Fallujah in April 2014, flooding the surrounding regions, while cutting the water supply to the Shia-dominated south. Around 12,000 families lost their homes and 200km<sup>2</sup> of villages and fields were either flooded or dried up. The economy of the region also suffered with destruction of cropland and electricity shortages.



During the Battle of Mosul it was reported that commercially available quadcopters and drones were being used by ISIS as surveillance and weapons delivery platforms using extemporized cradles to drop grenades and other explosives. The ISIS drone facility became a target of Royal Air Force strike aircraft.

#### Non-combatant recruits

Although ISIS attracts followers from different parts of the world by promoting the image of holy war, not all of its recruits end up in combatant roles. There have been several cases of new recruits expecting to be mujahedeen who have returned from Syria disappointed by the everyday jobs that were assigned to them, such as drawing water or cleaning toilets, or by the ban imposed on use of mobile phones during military training sessions.

ISIS publishes material directed at women. Although women are not allowed to take up arms, media groups encourage them to play supportive roles within ISIS, such as providing first aid, cooking, nursing and sewing skills, in order to become "good wives of jihad". In a document entitled *Women in the Islamic State: Manifesto and Case Study* released by the media wing of ISIS' all-female Al-Khanssaa Brigade, emphasis is given to the paramount importance of marriage and motherhood (as early as nine years old). Women should live a life of "sedentariness", fulfilling her "divine duty of motherhood" at home, with a few exceptions like teachers and doctors. Equality for women is opposed, as is education on non-religious subjects, the "worthless worldly sciences".

#### Communications Propaganda

ISIS is known for its extensive and effective use of propaganda. It uses a version of the Muslim Black Standard flag and developed an emblem which has clear symbolic meaning in the Muslim world.

#### Traditional media

In November 2006, shortly after the group's rebranding as the "Islamic State of Iraq", it established the Al-Furqan Foundation for Media Production, which produces CDs, DVDs, posters, pamphlets, and web-related propaganda products and official statements. It began to expand its media presence in 2013, with the formation of a second media wing, Al-I'tisam Media Foundation, in March and the Ajnad Foundation for Media Production, specializing in nasheeds and audio content, in August.

In mid-2014, ISIS established the Al-Hayat Media Center, which targets Western audiences and produces material in English, German, Russian and French. When ISIS announced its expansion to other countries in November 2014, it established media departments for the new branches, and its media apparatus ensured that the new branches follow the same models it uses in Iraq and Syria. FBI Director James Comey has said that ISIS's "propaganda is unusually slick," noting that, "They are broadcasting... in something like 23 languages".

In July 2014, al-Hayat began publishing a digital magazine called Dabiq, in a number of different languages including English. According to the magazine, its name is taken from the town of Dabiq in northern Syria, which is mentioned in a hadith about Armageddon. Al-Hayat also began publishing other digital magazines, including the Turkish language Konstantiniyye, the Ottoman word for Istanbul, and the French language Dar al-Islam. By late 2016, these magazines had apparently all been discontinued, with Al-Hayat's material being consolidated into a new magazine called Rumiya (Arabic for Rome).

The group also runs a radio network called Al-Bayan, which airs bulletins in Arabic, Russian and English and provides coverage of its activities in Iraq, Syria and Libya.

#### Social media

ISIS's use of social media has been described by one expert as "probably more sophisticated than [that of] most US companies". It regularly uses social media, particularly Twitter, to distribute its messages. The group uses the encrypted instant messaging service Telegram to disseminate images, videos and updates.

The group is known for releasing videos and photographs of executions of prisoners, whether beheadings, shootings, caged prisoners being burnt alive or submerged gradually until drowned. Journalist Abdel Bari Atwan described ISIS's media content as part of a "systematically applied policy". The escalating violence of its killings "guarantees" the attention of the media and public.

Along with images of brutality, ISIS presents itself as "an emotionally attractive place where people 'belong', where everyone is a 'brother' or 'sister'". The "most potent psychological pitch" of ISIS media is the promise of heavenly reward to dead jihadist fighters. Frequently posted in their media are dead jihadists' smiling faces, the ISIS 'salute' of a 'right-hand index finger pointing heavenward', and testimonies of happy widows. ISIS has also attempted to present a more "rational argument" in a series of videos hosted by the kidnapped journalist John Cantlie. In one video, various current and former US officials were quoted, such as the then US President Barack Obama and former CIA Officer Michael Scheuer.

It has encouraged sympathizers to initiate Vehicle-ramming and attacks worldwide.

#### Finances

According to a 2015 study by the Financial Action Task Force, ISIS's five primary sources of revenue are as followed (listed in order of significance):

1. proceeds from the occupation of territory (including control of banks, petroleum reservoirs, taxation, extortion, and robbery of economic assets)
2. kidnapping for ransom
3. donations from Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, often disguised as meant for "humanitarian charity"

4. material support provided by foreign fighters
5. fundraising through modern communication networks

Since 2012, ISIS has produced annual reports giving numerical information on its operations, somewhat in the style of corporate reports, seemingly in a bid to encourage potential donors.

In 2014, the RAND Corporation analyzed ISIS' funding sources from documents captured between 2005 and 2010. It found that outside donations amounted to only 5% of the group's operating budgets, and that cells inside Iraq were required to send up to 20% of the income generated from kidnapping, extortion rackets and other activities to the next level of the group's leadership, which would then redistribute the funds to provincial or local cells that were in difficulties or needed money to conduct attacks. In 2016, RAND estimated that ISIS finances from its largest source of income — oil revenues and the taxes it extracts from people under its control — had fallen from about \$1.9 billion in 2014 to \$870 million.

In mid-2014, the Iraqi National Intelligence Service obtained information that ISIS had assets worth US\$2 billion, making it the richest jihadist group in the world. About three-quarters of this sum was said to have been looted from Mosul's central bank and commercial banks in the city.

#### Monetary system

ISIS mints its own gold, silver, and copper coins, based on the coinage used by the Umayyad Caliphate in the 7th century. It believes paper money is or will be "worthless". (Economists believe this use of gold will present problems as users will want to hoard rather than spend gold coins and will use paper currency instead.)

#### Evolution

Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Jordanian Salafi jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his militant group Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, founded in 1999, achieved notoriety in the early stages of the Iraqi insurgency for their suicide attacks on Shia mosques, civilians, Iraqi government institutions and Italian soldiers partaking in the US-led 'Multi-National Force'. Al-Zarqawi's group officially pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network in October 2004, changing its name to Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn "Organization of Jihad's Base in Mesopotamia"), also known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Attacks by the group on civilians, Iraqi government forces, foreign diplomats and soldiers, and American convoys continued with roughly the same intensity.

In a letter to al-Zarqawi in July 2005, al-Qaeda's then deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri outlined a four-stage plan to expand the Iraq War. The plan included expelling US forces from Iraq, establishing an Islamic authority as a caliphate, spreading the conflict to Iraq's secular neighbors, and clashing with Israel, which the letter said, "[...] was established only to challenge any new Islamic entity".

In January 2006, AQI joined with several smaller Iraqi insurgent groups under an umbrella organization called the Mujahedeen Shura Council (MSC). According to counterterrorism researcher Brian Fishman, the merger was an attempt to give the group a more Iraqi flavor, and perhaps to distance al-Qaeda from some of al-Zarqawi's tactical errors, such as the 2005 bombings by AQI of three hotels in Amman. On 7 June 2006, a US airstrike killed al-Zarqawi, who was succeeded as leader of the group by the Egyptian militant Abu Ayyub al-Masri.

On 12 October 2006, the Mujahedeen Shura Council united with three smaller groups and six Sunni tribes to form the "Mutayibeen Coalition". It pledged "To rid Sunnis from the oppression of the rejectionists (Shi'ite Muslims) and the crusader occupiers ... to restore rights even at the price of our own lives ... to make Allah's word supreme in the world, and to restore the glory of Islam". A day later, the Mujahedeen Shura Council declared the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), comprising Iraq's six mostly Sunni Arab governorates. Abu Omar al-Baghdadi was announced as its emir, and al-Masri was given the title of Minister of War within the ISI's ten-member cabinet.

According to a study compiled by United States intelligence agencies in early 2007, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) planned to seize power in the central and western areas of Iraq and turn it into a Sunni caliphate. The group built in strength and at its height enjoyed a significant presence in the Iraqi governorates of Al Anbar, Diyala and Baghdad, claiming Baqubah as a capital city.

The Iraq War troop surge of 2007 supplied the United States military with more manpower for operations, resulting in dozens of high-level AQI members being captured or killed. Between July and October 2007, al-Qaeda in Iraq was reported to have lost its secure military bases in Al Anbar province and the Baghdad area. During 2008, a series of US and Iraqi offensives managed to drive out AQI-aligned insurgents from their former safe havens, such as the Diyala and Al Anbar governorates, to the area of the northern city of Mosul.

By 2008, the ISI was describing itself as being in a state of "extraordinary crisis". Its violent attempts to govern territory led to a backlash from Sunni Arab Iraqis and other insurgent groups and a temporary decline in the group, which was attributable to a number of factors, notably the Anbar Awakening.

In late 2009, the commander of US forces in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, stated that the ISI "has transformed significantly in the last two years. What once was dominated by foreign individuals has now become more and more dominated by Iraqi citizens". On 18 April 2010, the ISI's two top leaders, Abu Ayyub al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, were killed in a joint US-Iraqi raid near Tikrit. In a press conference in June 2010, General Odierno reported that 80% of the ISI's top 42 leaders, including recruiters and financiers, had been killed or captured, with only eight remaining at large. He said that they had been cut off from al-Qaeda's leadership in Pakistan.

On 16 May 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was appointed the new leader of the Islamic State of Iraq. Al-Baghdadi replenished the group's leadership, many of whom had been killed or captured, by appointing former Iraqi military and Intelligence Service officers who had served during Saddam Hussein's rule. These men, nearly all of whom had spent time imprisoned by the US military at Camp Bucca, came to make up about one third of Baghdadi's top 25 commanders, including Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi, Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, and Abu Muslim al-Turkmani.

One of them, a former colonel called Samir al-Khelifawi, also known as Haji Bakr, became the overall military commander in charge of overseeing the group's operations. Al-Khelifawi was instrumental in doing the ground work that led to the growth of ISIS.

In July 2012, al-Baghdadi released an audio statement online announcing that the group was returning to former strongholds from which US troops and the Sons of Iraq had driven them in 2007 and 2008. He declared the start of a new offensive in Iraq called 'Breaking the Walls', aimed at freeing members of the group held in Iraqi prisons. Violence in Iraq had begun to escalate in June 2012, primarily with AQI's car bomb attacks, and by July 2013, monthly fatalities exceeded 1,000 for the first time since April 2008.

#### Syrian Civil War

In March 2011, protests began in Syria against the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad. The following months, violence between demonstrators and security forces led to a gradual militarization of the conflict. In August, al-Baghdadi began sending Syrian and Iraqi ISI members experienced in guerilla warfare across the border into Syria to establish an organization there. Led by a Syrian known as Abu Muhammad al-Julani, this group began to recruit fighters and establish cells throughout the country. In January 2012, the group announced its formation as Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl as-Sham – Jabhat al-Nusra – more commonly known as the al-Nusra Front. Al-Nusra grew rapidly into a capable fighting force, with popular support among Syrians opposed to the Assad government.

#### Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, 2013–14

On 8 April 2013, al-Baghdadi released an audio statement in which he announced that the al-Nusra Front had been established, financed, and supported by the Islamic State of Iraq, and that the two groups were merging under the name "Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham". Al-Julani issued a statement denying the merger, and complaining that neither he nor anyone else in al-Nusra's leadership had been consulted about it. In June 2013, Al Jazeera reported that it had obtained a letter written by al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, addressed to both leaders, in which he ruled against the merger, and appointed an emissary to oversee relations between them to put an end to tensions. That same month, al-Baghdadi released an audio message rejecting al-Zawahiri's ruling and declaring that the merger was going ahead.

Meanwhile, the ISIS campaign to free its imprisoned members culminated in simultaneous raids on Taji and Abu Ghraib prisons in July 2013, freeing more than 500 prisoners, many of them veterans of the Iraqi insurgency. In October 2013, al-Zawahiri ordered the disbanding of ISIS, putting al-Nusra Front in charge of jihadist efforts in Syria, but al-Baghdadi rejected al-Zawahiri's order, and his group continued to operate in Syria. In February 2014, after an eight-month power struggle, al-Qaeda publicly disavowed any relations with ISIS.

According to journalist Sarah Birke, there are "significant differences" between al-Nusra Front and ISIS. While al-Nusra actively calls for the overthrow of the Assad government, ISIS "tends to be more focused on establishing its own rule on conquered territory". ISIS is "far more ruthless" in building an Islamic state, "carrying out sectarian attacks and imposing sharia law immediately". While al-Nusra has a "large contingent of foreign fighters", it is seen as a home-grown group by many Syrians; by contrast, ISIS fighters have been described as "foreign 'occupiers'" by many Syrian refugees. Foreign fighters in Syria include Russian-speaking jihadists who were part of Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA). In November 2013, Abu Omar al-Shishani, leader of the Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar (JMA), swore an oath of allegiance to al-Baghdadi; the group then split between those who followed al-Shishani in joining ISIS and those who continued to operate independently in the JMA under new leadership.

In January 2014, rebels affiliated with the Islamic Front and the US-trained Free Syrian Army launched an offensive against ISIS militants in and around the city of Aleppo, following months of tensions over ISIS's behavior, which included the seizure of property and weapons from rebel groups, and the arrests and killings of activists. Months of clashes ensued, causing thousands of casualties, with ISIS withdrawing its forces from Idlib and Latakia provinces and redeploying them to reinforce its strongholds in Raqqa and Aleppo. It also launched an offensive against all other opposition forces active in the eastern province of Deir ez-Zor, on the border with Iraq. By June 2014, ISIS had largely defeated its rivals in the province with many, who had not been killed or driven away, pledging allegiance to it.

In Iraq, ISIS was able to capture most of Fallujah in January 2014, and in June 2014 was able to seize control of Mosul.

#### As Islamic State, 2014–present

On 29 June 2014, the organization proclaimed itself to be a worldwide caliphate. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – known by his supporters as Amir al-Mu'minin, Caliph Ibrahim – was named its caliph, and the group renamed itself ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah ("Islamic State" (IS)). As a "Caliphate", it claims religious, political and military authority over all Muslims worldwide. The concept of it being a caliphate and the name "Islamic State" have been rejected by governments and Muslim leaders worldwide.

In June and July 2014, Jordan and Saudi Arabia moved troops to their borders with Iraq, after the Iraqi government lost control of (or withdrew from) strategic crossing points that then came under the control of either ISIS or tribes that supported it. There was speculation that Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri

al-Maliki had ordered a withdrawal of troops from the Iraq–Saudi crossings in order "to increase pressure on Saudi Arabia and bring the threat of ISIS over-running its borders as well".

In July 2014, ISIS recruited more than 6,300 fighters, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, some of whom were thought to have previously fought for the Free Syrian Army. On 23 July 2014, Abu Sayyaf leader Isnilon Totoni Hapilon and some masked men swore loyalty to al-Baghdadi in a video, giving ISIS a presence in the Philippines. In September 2014, the group began kidnapping people for ransom.

On 7 March 2015, Boko Haram swore formal allegiance to ISIS, giving ISIS an official presence in Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon. On 13 March 2015, a group of militants from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan swore allegiance to ISIS.

---

Note:

This information was condensed from the following source. Numerous passages were left as originally written to ensure an accurate portrayal of the research conducted by original sources.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic\\_State\\_of\\_Iraq\\_and\\_the\\_Levant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant)